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& The Ritual Year 4

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The Neo-Pagan Ritual Year and Gender

JENNY BUTLER

ABSTRACT. This paper deals with the gendered roles of participants in particular neo-pagan rituals connected to the ritual year. In neo-pagan worldview, there are many parallels between the life cycle and the seasonal progression or "Wheel of the Year". Within neo-pagan cosmology, the individual human life cycle is understood as meaningful when viewed as a microcosm of wider cycles that exist in the universe. These cosmic forces are often themselves interpreted as gendered: gods, goddesses, male and female spirits can all be interpreted as gendered personifications of the divine.

KEYWORDS: neo-pagan, paganism, nature religion, Celtic mythology, magical worldview

This paper deals with the neo-pagan¹ view of the relationship between the ritual year cycle, gender, and the celebration of phases of the human life cycle. Contemporary Pagans view their own lives in the context of various cycles: that of the ritual year, the moon's phases and the ecological progression of birth, death and new life as well as symbolic cycles. The comprehension of the seasonal cycle, and the myths associated with each festival, is echoed in personal mythologies of individual neo-pagans in regard to the development of their personal lives. Neo-pagans order their lives in terms of cycles, whether these are seasonal, lunar, solar, corporal (for women, particularly the menstrual cycle), or the all-embracing metaphor of birth-death-rebirth, which features prominently in neo-pagan literature and discourse. "Rebirth" can be taken to mean a physical regeneration of plant or animal life or a symbolic renewal or it can refer to the concept of reincarnation. For neo-pagans, life is regulated according to these circular rhythms and metaphors. Individuals' experiences and ordinary happenings are related to the symbolic cycles of life and the two dimensions are inextricably linked in neo-pagan worldview. It must be stressed that there is a plurality of forms of neo-paganism, often referred to by insiders as "paths" or

"traditions"² and within each tradition, there is a multiplicity of views across individuals.

GENDER IN NEO-PAGAN COSMOLOGY

Gender polarity is central both symbolically, in terms of how gods and goddesses are conceptualised, and practically in terms of how ritual groups are organised and how rituals are performed in relation to the roles of male and female participants. For some Pagans, there is a duality: a god and goddess while others hold polytheistic beliefs and venerate different gods and goddesses as distinct supernatural beings. Even where the practitioner holds polytheist or pantheist beliefs, it is common to find dual gender categorisations in references to "the god and goddess" or "lord and lady". Although there is belief in and veneration of both gods and goddesses, there is still a penchant for "The Goddess" symbol; "although Pagans do claim to seek a balance, and although many will teach that the masculine and the feminine are of equal importance, the emphasis is often placed very firmly on 'the Great Goddess' and the feminine" (Partridge 2004: 270). There is rejection of the patriarchal monotheisms to be found in Christianity, Islam and other world religions. Despite this cosmological emphasis on the divine feminine in some sectors of neo-paganism, neo-paganism must be distinguished from "Goddess Religion", which is more commonly associated with feminist witchcraft³ and the New Age movement. On the whole, neo-pagan cosmology is inclusive of male and female divinity and cosmic energies. Within neo-pagan culture a man professing to be a "goddess worshipper" is not unusual. As has been mentioned above, there is an emphasis on the Mother Goddess figure but even so the female is not an exclusive divinity: "neo-pagan religions usually focus on female deities, particularly a Great Mother Goddess, although ordinarily not to the exclusion of male deities, such as a pre-Christian image of a horned god" (Jorgensen and Russell 1999: 327). The "Horned God" is a figure that features in different neo-pagan traditions and his horns are associated with animals such as the bull and the ram and with the crescent shape of the moon:

The Horned God is the consort of the Goddess and represents the male principle of the supreme deity. He is the lord of the woodlands, the hunt, and animals. He is also associated with death, the underworld, sexuality, vitality, logic, and power [...] the Horned God personifies the sun, in contrast to the Goddess's moon, with whom he alternates in ruling the fertility cycle of birth-death-rebirth (Lewis 1999: 146).

As shown here, the fertility cycle extends to the symbolic roles of divine beings. The life cycle of particular deities is viewed by many neo-pagans as being tripartite. There are three phases of the goddess's life cycle, namely maiden, mother and crone, mirroring the waxing, full and waning phases of the moon respectively. These three phases of maiden, mother and crone are paralleled to the life cycle of real flesh-and-blood women. In the case of the male deity, the phases are young "seeker" god, consort of the goddess and old father-god and correspondingly the lives of flesh-and-blood men are understood as following similar phases of young male in a time of learning, husband/partner and old age.

There is an embracement of both male and female divinity in relation to neo-pagan discourse, artwork and other forms of expression; there is also an emphasis in neo-pagan worldview that male and female are of equal importance. There is a conceptual distinction between the divine as deity and the divine as spiritual essence within a human being. There is a differentiation between the divine as immanent or indwelling in nature and the deities as distinct from this world in that they are separate entities that exist independently of human life, but both concepts are commonly held concurrently by neo-pagans.

Rather than the focus being on the physical, biological sex of an individual, there is more attention paid to aspects of gender, often referred to as "energies", within practitioners; for example, a man can identify with particular aspects of goddess energy or the "divine feminine" and a woman can connect with the "divine masculine". Gender polarization can therefore be in reference to the gender division within each individual and is thus ideologically inclusive of different gender identities and individualism as regards self-concepts of masculinity or femininity and of personal sexuality.

GENDER ROLES IN RITUAL PRACTICE

In mainstream culture, there is the popular notion that witches are women and druids are men while within neo-pagan culture, Witches can be male or female and likewise Druids can be either sex. The majority of magical groups have both male and female members unless they are specifically all-female or all-male groups⁴. Discussing the tradition of Druidry, Graham Harvey states that: "gender plays a minimal role in allocating roles or recognition of rank or ability in most contemporary Druid orders. Membership, too, seems fairly evenly balanced between men and women" (2004: 278). I have found this to be the case with Irish Druid groups or "Groves" as they are termed and with organisations such as the Hibernian Order of Druids (HOOD) (see further Butler 2005). In fact, the members of HOOD reject the term "druidess" because they feel it is a Victorian imposition on the word and liken it to "poetess"; the general feeling is that, since women are as capable of fulfilling their spiritual obligations as men are, the word "druidess" is rather demeaning.

Wiccan covens generally have an equal number of men and women in the belief that there should be a balance of masculine and feminine energies within any given ritual. Gardnerian⁵ Wiccan covens have more rigid gender roles and rituals fixated on the union of male and female energies. The basic concept of this has its basis in the Jungian theoretical complementarities between femininity and masculinity. Wiccans become clergy-members on their initiation⁶ into a coven i.e. the neophyte practitioner becomes a priest or priestess of the Wiccan religion. There are different stages or "degrees" of initiation, depending on the kind of coven and there can be a second-degree initiation to High Priest or High Priestess. Another gendered term is "Witch Queen", as one Wiccan High Priestess explains: "A Witch Queen means that I have had more than three covens spring from the one I originally started" (Interview with Alice; see References) and this title has certain status and significance attached to it within Wicca. Each role and status has particular activities and responsibilities associated with it, one example of which is "aspecting", discussed below.

SEASONAL CELEBRATIONS:

The ritual year⁷ holds considerable importance for neo-pagans and particular things are done in celebration of the progression of the seasonal cycle or, as neo-pagans term it, "Wheel of the Year"⁸ (for an overview of Irish neo-pagan festival celebrations see Butler 2002). The four major festivals mark the beginning of each new season: spring (Imbolc), summer (Bealtaine or May Day), autumn (Lughnasadh) and winter (Samhain). The kinds of ritual activities that take place at each seasonal transition reflect the symbolic importance of that time of year. For example, initiations are often held at Imbolc since it is a time of symbolic newness in that it is a period of new plant growth and new animal life. Handfastings (weddings) may be held on Bealtaine, as this is a time of fertility in the natural world. Another time that is chosen for marriage rituals is the Summer Solstice, which, in neo-pagan cosmology, is the time when the solar god and goddess of the land unite in a "Sacred Marriage" and is accordingly associated with physical union, sexuality and marriage between human couples. Lughnasadh is a time of symbolic harvest and taking stock of one's life and achievements. Samhain is a time of letting go of negativity and an occasion for symbolic sacrifice, normally enacted in ritual as a way of easing the emotional cutting of ties with certain people or activities. The Winter Solstice or Yule is another transitional period, normally associated with gathering together of family and the celebration of close bonds with loved ones. It is also connected to the symbolic rebirth of the sun, as explained by one informant: "[on] Yule, which is the birth of the Sun God, we might do a ritual drama enacting the birth of the Sun God from the Goddess" (Interview with Sarah).

It is interesting to notice how gender identities are expressed and played out at neo-pagan gatherings. Perhaps the most intriguing are gatherings for the purpose of celebrating the festival of Samhain or Halloween (see further Butler 2009). The carnivalesque atmosphere that features in the Halloween festivities of mainstream society features in neo-pagan parties, as does the dress-up factor. Many neo-pagans don costumes and disguises for Samhain merrymaking; often Witches dress up as the witch-figure of popular culture, using symbolism reminiscent of either the crone or "wise woman"

personage or the fantasy witch that is more commonly connected to children's literature and other forms of children's media. In mainstream culture, the witch figure and the event of Halloween go together and neo-pagans sometimes make reference to this in a light-hearted way within the context of their own celebrations. The seasonal festivals are liminal times in which various celebratory performances take place. Samhain is a time of particular mischievousness and a time when imagery can be played with by guising and decorating houses for parties. As Victor Turner states, "liminality may involve a complex sequence of episodes in sacred space-time and may also include subversive and ludic (or playful) events" (Turner 1982: 27). This ludic capacity is evident during Samhain, especially with the conscious frivolousness of using conventional or stereotypical "witch" imagery when one self-identifies as a Witch. Samhain is a time of celebration of the goddess in her "crone" or "hag" aspects, both terms that have been reclaimed and attributed specific meanings within neo-pagan culture; they are used to refer to the goddess in her dark, destructive aspect and also represent the old age phase of human life.

GENDERED "ASPECTING" OF DEITY

At Esbats, which are ritual gatherings of Wiccans that occur on the full moon, there is sometimes a ritual called "drawing down the moon". This is a ritual "through which the High Priestess receives, through invocation, the spirit of the moon goddess and becomes her mortal incarnation. The Goddess is invoked into her by a High Priest using the principle of polarity. As the Goddess incarnate she then delivers a charge, manifesting for the coven members" (Jordan 1998: 60). The "charge" in the context of Wiccan ritual relates to the delivery of commands from the Goddess through the High Priestess.

The Charge of the Goddess is the most famous and oft misquoted piece of text in Wicca. The Charge of the Goddess was written by Doreen Valiente, who was Gerald Gardner's High Priestess [...] the priest draws down the moon on the High Priestess. The drawing down of the moon is the poetic

name for invoking the spirit of the goddess into the High Priestess and then the High Priestess delivers the Charge. The Charge is a piece of prose and the High Priestess will then deliver that and just say this to the group and it changes every time. I mean there's a standard set text but it usually changes because there is more coming through because of the spirit of the goddess. And it is something that has to be experienced to be understood to be perfectly honest with you [...] it sounds like it's just a declaration of a piece of text like you would read, but there is more behind it because there is an energy behind it and until you've actually seen that it's hard to imagine it (Interview with Mary).

Some have made references to "drawing down the sun" as an invocation of the god. The purpose of such rituals is for the practitioner to achieve an altered state of consciousness in which they embody deity or allow divine energy to emanate through them. This is a kind of religious possession that is sometimes referred to as "aspecting", where it is believed that "the subject actually embodies a goddess or god in physical form" (Magliocco 2004: 172). The divine energies are often gendered and this shapes the personal awareness of gender identity in ritual contexts. As Susan Greenwood points out, "engaging in magical rituals designed to facilitate contact with the otherworld affects magicians' notions of identity, gender and morality. These areas of magical life illustrate how central the experience of the otherworld is to magical thought" (Greenwood 2000: 1). There are complex connections between an individual's identity and their conceptualisation of the otherworld and associated supernatural beings.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Neo-pagans engage with the world, as all humans do, from an embodied, gendered perspective and their cosmology is comprised of gendered beings and entities. Neo-pagan dialogues, especially in relation to the practice of magic, show that gender is often a significant part of ritual. It is the intention of this article to give some

insight into neo-pagan cosmology and worldview in regard to how gender is significant and to provide at least a rudimentary depiction of how gender roles are understood within ritual contexts. To more fully understand gender in neo-pagan culture, the topic would have to be examined in conjunction with related areas of sexuality and identity-construction; this is a broad subject that deserves a more thorough exploration than space has allowed here⁹.

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Notes

- 1 Insiders describe the movement as "Paganism" and practitioners use the term "Pagan" self-referentially. It is less common for practitioners to use the term "neo-pagan" but from a scholarly standpoint it is useful to employ this term as it helps to avoid confusion between the modern cultural movement and classical and historical paganism in the sense of indigenous religions.
- 2 My research deals with Irish neo-paganism, particularly the traditions of Wicca, Witchcraft (there are different kinds of neo-pagan witchcraft that are distinct from Wicca) and Druidry. My informants also include those who self-identify as "Pagan" or "earth-based spiritualist", using these labels generically and not associating themselves with a specific neo-pagan path.
- 3 There are feminist groups of neo-pagan witches also, such as Dianic Wiccan covens, which normally focus their religious worship on the goddess and exclude the god.
- 4 I can describe only the groups and organisations I have encountered during the course of my fieldwork. It should be noted that although they

do exist in Ireland, I have not sought out women-only or men-only ritual groups of neo-pagans for involvement in my research so I cannot comment on the activities or worldviews of these groups.

- 5 Gerald Gardner (1884-1964) was the British founder of Wicca as a mystery religion. He set down a system of ritual magic that became known as Gardnerian Wicca. Nowadays, traditions that adhere to the Gardnerian ritual system might be referred to as "British Traditional Wicca" to distinguish them from the many other kinds of Wicca and neo-pagan Witchcraft that follow different ritual structures. In Ireland, there are Gardnerian covens as well as a variety of other Wiccan covens.
- 6 There are Wiccan practitioners who are "solitaries" and not involved in any groups. One does not have to be initiated to be a Wiccan but usually joining a coven involves being initiated into the chosen ritual group.
- 7 This paper deals with how Irish neo-pagans celebrate their seasonal festivals. It should be noted that neo-paganism is an international movement and there are interesting parallels and comparisons but also significant differences between neo-paganism as it is found in different socio-geographical contexts.
- 8 The "Wheel of the Year" passes through eight festivals, which can be divided into four major fire festivals: Samhain on October 31st, Imbolc on February 1st, Bealtaine on May 1st and Lughnasadh on August 1st and the solstices and equinoxes: Spring Equinox on March 21st and Autumn Equinox on September 21st, the Winter Solstice on December 21st and Summer Solstice on June 21st.
- 9 The author intends to examine this aspect of neo-pagan culture elsewhere.

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Interviews (all audio-recorded):

This paper draws on information contained in thirty-seven ethnographic interviews conducted between 2001 and 2009. Quotes were taken verbatim from the following:

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Interview with Sarah, Gardnerian Wiccan High Priestess, 14/02/02.

Interview with Alice, Third Degree Wiccan High Priestess, 09/01/02.

Interview with Mary, Third Degree High Priestess of Alexandrian Wiccan Coven, 02/05/02.

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